

Saving Northside

The Value of Neighborhood Conservation Districts

Co-authored by Delores Bailey and Roger Waldon, FAICP

In the past few decades, economic growth in Chapel Hill has fueled the demand for housing in the town and put increasing development pressure on many of the town's traditional neighborhoods. Northside, a historically African-American neighborhood near downtown Chapel Hill, began experiencing these development pressures in the 1990s as new construction in the neighborhood began increasing rapidly. In response to these pressures, Northside residents worked together with town officials to establish a Neighborhood Conservation overlay district to constrain development in ways that would preserve the character of this long-standing neighborhood. This article describes the specific development pressures facing Northside, the collaborative strategy used to develop this Neighborhood Conservation District, and the benefits reaped by the community following its implementation.

One of the fundamental principles of the planning profession is that real estate markets, left to their own dynamics and devices, produce results that may be economically viable but which are potentially damaging to the character of our communities. In large part, the planner's role is identifying the circumstances where intervention into the functioning of the marketplace is the correct approach, and then arranging for the intervention to achieve any number of objectives—environmental protection, social equity, community appearance, quality of life, transportation efficiency, historic preservation, public fiscal health, or all of the above. Furthermore, protecting and enhancing the well-being of minority and low-wealth neighborhoods is one of the primary responsibilities of the planning profession. Our Code of Ethics demands it of us, our internal compass tells us that it is “the right thing to do,” and experience demonstrates that it adds value to our communities. Chapel Hill's Northside neighborhood offers an excellent opportunity to examine these issues.

Background

The Northside neighborhood in Chapel Hill is historic,

diverse, cohesive, and vibrant. It is also (relatively) affordable, with a wide range of housing choices. Mix those attributes together in a location within two blocks of downtown Chapel Hill and within an easy walk to the University of North Carolina, and it is no surprise to see a powerful set of forces and constraints at work: Old vs. new; Lifetime residents vs. Newcomers; Gentrification; Rising housing prices; Families, history, culture, all in motion. The story of Northside's effort to preserve history and character demonstrates the posi-

Delores Bailey is the Executive Director of EmPOWERment, Inc., a nonprofit community advocacy agency. Ms. Bailey is a resident of Northside, and chaired the committee that developed the Northside Conservation District proposal.

Roger Waldon is a Senior Consultant at Clarion Associates. Prior to his work at Clarion, Mr. Waldon served for 21 years as Chapel Hill Planning Director. He led the staff team that worked with the Northside Committee, Chapel Hill Planning Board, and the Town Council to develop the Conservation District.

tive changes that planners can bring about by bringing together neighborhood residents, planners, property owners, landlords, renters, and the community's elected leadership.

Chapel Hill is here because of the University of North Carolina. Always an academic community at heart, this town has from its beginning always maintained a diverse population, and current racial and economic profiles continue to show a blend of cultures and income levels. Northside has played a key role in this history, and many of Chapel Hill's African-American families have called Northside home. In recent years, the collection of modestly sized houses on small lots also has made Northside one of the most affordable locations in Chapel Hill, attracting young families and off-campus students.

About Northside

The Northside community, located adjacent to downtown Chapel Hill and Carrboro, is one of Chapel Hill's two longstanding African-American neighborhoods. This older and distinctive in-town residential neighborhood contributes significantly to the overall character and identity of Chapel Hill—a fact that was embraced during the process of creating a Neighborhood Conservation District for the area.

In terms of geography, Northside is approximately 150 acres in size, and is primarily residential, consisting mainly of small, single-family homes. There are also three public housing units and two apartment complexes within the neighborhood. According to the 2000 census, 24% of the housing in Northside is owner-occupied and 76% is renter-occupied. The large number of renters is attributed to the public housing and apart-

ment units within the neighborhood, as well as the large number of University students living in the East side of the neighborhood. According to the 2000 Census, the

racial profile of the neighborhood is approximately 47% White, 49% Black, and 4% Other. (Townwide, the profile is 78% White, 12% Black). In 2000, nearly 37% of Northside residents were in households with income below the poverty level, compared to 22% townwide. There are several service organizations located within the neighborhood, including Chapel Hill's Hargraves Center,

the Orange County Human Services complex, and four churches.

The history of the Northside community is important to this story. Northside has always been racially diverse, and there has always been a good mix of owner-occupied and renter-occupied housing. Until recently, however, economic diversity was not present—this was one of Chapel Hill's lowest-income neighborhoods. But it



**Northside
Neighborhood,
Chapel Hill, NC**



Traditional Northside home

was also the bedrock foundation for almost anyone who was African-American. The four churches in and near Northside have historically always been vibrant and active, and most African-American families have traditionally attended one of these four places of worship, all within walking distance of Northside homes. Northside is the place where many of the community's African-American leaders grew up—people like Howard Lee, Frances Hargraves, and Ed Caldwell. The neighborhood's William P. Hargraves Community Center was the home of an all-black Navy band during World War II. The center has also long served the neighborhood's recreational needs; indeed, in the 1960s it constructed the only swimming pool open to the town's African-American children.

Neighborhood Under Pressure

The proximity of Northside to downtown Chapel Hill and to the UNC campus has both positive and negative effects upon the neighborhood. Residents benefit from being within walking distance of a wide variety of social, cultural, and educational resources, as well as retail services. This proximity, however, has also placed significant development pressures on the neighborhood, pressures which began to accelerate during the 1980s and early 1990s. Growth in the town and the University fueled demand for more housing, and lower-cost residential areas began attracting investors. Properties were purchased, and formerly owner-occupied homes were converted to rental units, often leased to four or more unrelated individuals. In a domino effect, this conversion resulted in increasing rents for all neighborhood residents. Older adults found it increasingly difficult to remain in their homes, and economic pressures for sale and redevelopment increased, reinforcing the process.

During the 1990s, Chapel Hill found itself facing the prospect of rapidly changing demographics in this important neighborhood. The first physical sign involved

the increased incidence of new construction—the addition of newer and larger homes, the expansion of older homes, and the addition of parking areas. A major increase in activity occurred in 1998, with the construction of a number of duplex dwelling units. Whereas no permits were issued for duplex construction in Northside from 1991 to 1997, eight such permits were issued in 1998. The construction of these duplexes constituted a major and visible change in the community. While Northside had always provided rental housing, these rentals were traditionally in single-family structures and did not detract from the single-family character of the neighborhood. The surge in duplex construction activity represented a significant break from that tradition.



More recent additions to Northside

Some of the pressure on Northside's housing market came from students moving into the neighborhood. As one of the only neighborhoods providing affordable housing near the university, Northside became very attractive to students, as well as to developers and property owners who saw the potential for profit in renting to students. Increased rentals also increased the need for parking in the neighborhood, and because on-street parking is limited in Northside, people began parking their cars in front yards.

Finding the Right Strategy for Addressing A Changing Neighborhood

In one of the first responses to concerns from residents about the impacts of these new development trends, the

Town of Chapel Hill initiated a study to learn whether or not Northside met North Carolina's criteria for designation as a local Historic District; residents and planners thought that such a designation might help Northside preserve its single-family character. In this scenario, Historic District designation would be accompanied by stringent controls on the nature of expansions and new development to assure physical and visual congruity with surrounding properties. After review, the Town concluded that the neighborhood did in fact meet the threshold standards and could be designated as a Historic District.

The Chapel Hill Town Council then invited public comment on a Historic District designation proposal for Northside to see whether residents wanted to try this particular approach to neighborhood preservation. Surprisingly, the response from neighborhood residents and property owners was that a Historic District designation was the wrong development tool to use in Northside. Many residents were concerned about the increased level of regulation that would be involved in making even simple improvements to their homes if the neighborhood were given this particular designation. Additionally, some were also concerned that a stringent focus on the physical nature of structures alone would not address their fundamental concerns about the changing character of the neighborhood.

In response, the Town Council then asked the Chapel Hill Planning Board to engage in discussions with residents to identify key concerns and possible alternate responses. The conversations produced a list of concerns, but no good mechanisms for addressing these concerns. It became apparent that the lack of consensus among Northside residents would seriously undermine any serious attempts that the town might make in addressing issues of concern throughout the neighborhood. To resolve these conflicts, a dialogue was needed to help develop a meaningful level of consensus between the longtime residents of the Northside neighborhood, who

were loyal to and protective of the traditional character of the neighborhood, and newly arriving residents and property owners, who had different agendas.

Getting Planners Out of Conference Rooms and Into Living Rooms

Since the Northside community did not feel that a Historic District designation would fit its needs, the Chapel Hill Council offered residents another option—the designation of the Northside neighborhood as a Neighborhood Conservation District. Encouraged by the successes of Neighborhood Conservation Districts in other communities, the Council began exploring this possibility by appointing a committee of residents (both owner-occupants and renters), investor-owners, University representatives, town staff, and members of the Chapel Hill Planning Board. The underlying principle was to follow the lead of the residents. Staff was provided as a needed resource, but the leadership came from those who lived in Northside. The committee started meeting on a monthly basis, to discuss concerns, and to hear about the specifics of the Neighborhood Conservation District—how it might be constructed as an overlay zoning district with specific standards applying just to this neighborhood. Resident Delores Bailey was chosen to chair the committee, and work began in earnest.



Planners and Northside residents at a neighborhood event

This would be a long process, in part because of the complexity of the task, and in part because of previous false starts. At the outset, the first three meetings focused on facts and current regulations. Communication and trust needed to be established among the parties at the table, and staff members needed to position themselves to be seen as good listeners and as resources—not as outsiders coming in with ideas of what should be done.

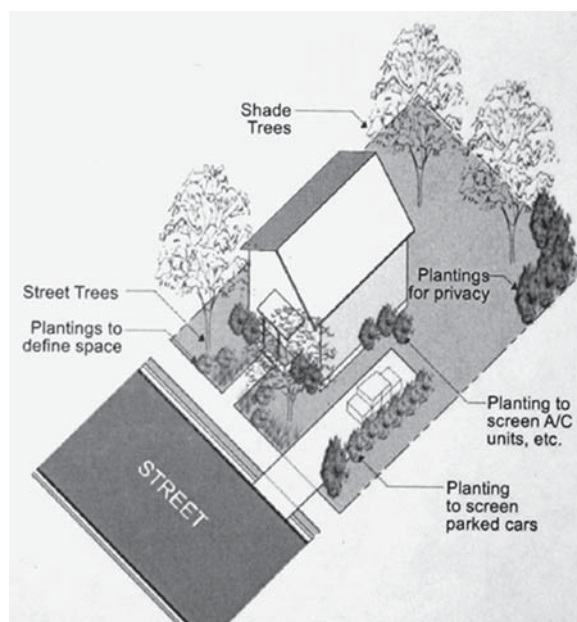
One of the most important early decisions involved scheduling the discussions in the community instead of Town Hall, as much as possible. Discussions about the future of the neighborhood were piggy-backed onto other neighborhood events, which provided a venue for elected and staff representatives from the town to mingle and interact with residents in the community itself. Emphasis was placed on listening to residents' concerns, to property-owners' needs, and to stories about the neighborhood. Another key decision was to not push the calendar too aggressively. Circumstances here required that levels of trust and credibility be established, and all agreed that time and repeated contact would be needed to accomplish that. Over time, consensus was built step-by-step: first on the key objectives, then on a range of possible responses, moving eventually to recommendations for specific components that could be woven together to create the new Conservation District.

Components of the Northside Conservation District

One point of consensus was to prohibit new duplexes. The Town Council demonstrated good faith by enacting

a temporary moratorium on new duplex construction; the resulting absence of development pressure gave the process a sufficient amount of time and space to produce consensus recommendations. After considerable discussion and debate, it was recommended that this temporary prohibition be made permanent. The district designation would also include a new concept: a maximum bathroom-to-bedroom ratio. This last item creatively emerged from committee discussions as a way of discouraging the rental of single rooms in a house, by requiring that the bathroom-to-bedroom ratio for any new or newly-expanding house would need to be less

than one to zero. In effect, this rule meant that not every bedroom in a house could have its own private bathroom. As of this publication, it remains to be seen if this new regulation will be effective in limiting the excessive rentals that had been taking place was anticipated. The main point, however, is that the Town Council embraced this new idea because it was brought forward by residents. Also included was a new notification requirement, which allows nearby residents and owners to know when construction activity is proposed so that extra



Northside's new Design Guidelines stay true to the existing design character of the neighborhood.

eyes can review plans and applications. This also gives residents and neighbors of a proposed development the opportunity to be consulted and advised as construction activities are being planned. A final product was a set of Design Guidelines to help inform all interested parties of what is expected as new development is planned. Other components of the new district included the following:

- a maximum house size of 2,000 square feet, with a provision for increase to 2,500 square

feet upon demonstration of hardship;

- reduced maximum building height;
- a maximum floor-area ratio to limit the maximum floor area of buildings to no more than 25% of the land area of the lot.

During the process of creating requirements for the Neighborhood Conservation District, there was much debate about what kinds of issues could be addressed through the additional zoning regulations and which could not. Through a consensus-building process, the Northside committee decided that physical characteristics of structures and use of structures could be regulated along with the use of land for parking. Whether or not a dwelling would be owner-occupied or renter-occupied, however, could not be regulated.

The Process Concludes

These new rules, which enjoyed consensus recommendation from the diverse committee membership, were enacted by the Town Council. An important spin-off effect of this process was the increased attention by many stakeholders in the Chapel Hill community to non-zoning issues that had been raised during discussions:

- The need for more sidewalks (addressed by the Town's Capital Improvements Program);
- The need for more security (addressed by increasing police presence and assigning Community Police officers to the neighborhood);
- The need for better enforcement of on-street parking regulations (addressed by more aggressive enforcement by the Police Department);
- The need for additional offerings at the Har graves Center (addressed through the Chapel Hill Parks and Recreation Department); and
- The need for more affordable homeownership opportunities (being addressed cooperatively by three local nonprofit organizations: EmPOWERment, Inc., the Orange County Community Housing and Land Trust, and

Habitat for Humanity).

The Benefits of Northside's Neighborhood Conservation District Designation

Northside residents had been asking for community help for a long time, but with little result. This time, however, community efforts are working: the construction of over-sized houses and duplexes has stopped; parking in front yards has stopped, except in driveways and on formal parking pads; new homeownership opportunities are being created; and investment in the improvement and maintenance of existing houses is becoming commonplace. Furthermore, community interest in, awareness of, and pride in the Northside Community has taken off. Every member of the Town Council and Town Advisory Boards knows about Northside, is aware of the neighborhood's importance to Chapel Hill, and is on the lookout for any proposed development or initiative that might negatively impact the neighborhood. Prospects for the neighborhood have improved so dramatically that a recent article in the Chapel Hill News (September 16, 2006) described the optimism about prospects for this neighborhood, "New homeownership opportunities are being created. Investment in the improvement and maintenance of existing houses is becoming commonplace."

It took 18 months of meetings to accomplish this, but those involved say it was worth it. Residents have expressed appreciation to the planners for their involve-



A meeting of the Northside Committee

ment in the process, and in the wake of this success, five other neighborhoods have asked for a similar process to be arranged for them. Chapel Hill is finding that the approach to creating a Neighborhood Conservation District needs to be neighborhood-specific and unique to each set of circumstances, relying heavily on local leadership where it exists and nurturing it where it does not. In general, the following considerations should be made in determining the appropriate process for any particular neighborhood:

Advantages of a slow, deliberate process:

- Allows formation of a steering committee made up of residents;
- Allows time for the committee to develop its methods and protocols;
- Allows time for political discussion and attention to the neighborhood;
- Allows time for extended discussions if the neighborhood is divided;
- Allows time for multiple meetings at different steps in the process;
- Promotes widespread ownership of the final products.

Advantages of a fast, expedited process:

- Allows for efficient use of time and resources when neighborhood leadership is already organized and in place, and if there is pre-project consensus around major points.
- Allows lower costs for staff, Council, and Planning Board time;
- Allows local government to be more responsive, resulting in timely response to concerns being expressed;
- Allows for quick action when potentially damaging impacts are imminent;
- Allows planners to work with more neighborhoods over a given period of time;

In Northside, the more deliberate, patient process, aided by the temporary moratorium on new duplex construction, was the way to go. Obviously, the design of a process for any particular neighborhood should be influenced by the circumstances and needs of that neighborhood.

Conclusions and Summary

Conservation of the character of older neighborhoods is a critically important issue. The Northside story offers an example of why a neighborhood like this is important to the larger community, and why preserving neighborhood character and history are necessary components of a strategy to maintain and enhance overall community diversity. Pursuit of a Neighborhood Conservation District can be very effective as a response to pressures for change, and can also serve as a good mechanism for preventing the erosion of neighborhood character. It is also an excellent way for a community's leadership to make a clear statement that says: "These issues and this neighborhood are important to the well-being of our entire community." This is what happened in Chapel Hill.

One of the main lessons we learned in going through this process was that local leadership is critical. These have to be neighborhood initiatives, with neighborhood residents in control and in leadership positions. Local leadership was in place in Northside, and they stepped up to the plate.

Neighborhood Conservation District initiatives, if done right, can get planners out of conference rooms and into living rooms. The value of this, both to the planner and to the community, is enormous. As in the Northside experience, this approach offers an opportunity for the planner to gain a more complete and intimate understanding of the community, and an opportunity for establishing communication and trust between planners and neighborhood residents.

In the relationship between minority populations and planners (many of whom are not minorities themselves), effectiveness often depends upon establishing communication, credibility, and trust. The planner's role, here more than ever, needs to be one of listening, providing information, and educating, all while deferring to community intelligence and working to forge relationships. The Neighborhood Conservation District process is particularly well suited to help accomplish this while also addressing overall community objectives.

References

This article draws upon the work of citizens, elected and appointed officials, and staff over the course of a decade from 1996 to 2006. Of particular note are the reports from the Town Council-appointed Northside Committee; multiple reports and memoranda prepared by the Chapel Hill Planning Department; a paper prepared in April, 1999 by UNC Planning Students, titled "A Neighborhood in Transition: Northside Neighborhood Focus Area Report," (prepared by Allison Freeman, Jeremy Klop, Audrey Levenson, Patrick McMahon, Constanza Pallini, and Sasha Vrtunski); and an October, 2004 report prepared for the Town of Chapel Hill by Bobbie Jo Munson and NC Preservation Partners, called, "Assessing Barriers to Mobility in the Northside Neighborhood."